

VZCZCXRO3789
OO RUEHCHI RUEHDT RUEHHM RUEHNH
DE RUEHBK #3531/01 3371123
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
O 021123Z DEC 08
FM AMEMBASSY BANGKOK
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 5277
INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING IMMEDIATE 6582
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA IMMEDIATE 9258
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL IMMEDIATE 5114
RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI IMMEDIATE 5935
RUEHHM/AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH CITY IMMEDIATE 0853
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI IMMEDIATE
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC IMMEDIATE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 003531

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MLS, CA, EEB, DS
TRANSPORTATION FOR TSA
STATE PASS TO USTR
TREASURY FOR OASIA
COMMERCE FOR EAP/MAC/OKSA
SINGAPORE FOR FINATT BAKER

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [ASEC](#) [CASC](#) [CMGT](#) [EAIR](#) [EFIN](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [ETRD](#) [TH](#)
SUBJECT: DECEMBER 2: UPDATE ON THAILAND'S MAKE-SHIFT
AIRLINE AND AIRPORT OPERATIONS

REF: BANGKOK 3492 (MOB SHUTS BANGKOK AIRPORT)

BANGKOK 00003531 001.2 OF 003

1. (SBU) Summary: The Embassy is assisting Amcits 24 hours a day though a call center manned by consular officers and volunteers from the Embassy community, to find hotel rooms and/or outbound transportation from Thailand. Neither United nor Northwest, the only U.S. carriers that serve Bangkok, have plans to resume flights at this point. We are exploring the feasibility of USG-arranged charter flights, but are not yet suggesting that publicly. While most makeshift Thai Airways operations are currently based at U-Tapao air base 90 miles from Bangkok, smaller airlines are standing up international flight operations at smaller airports around the country. The military wing of Don Muang airport in Bangkok may be the best option for charter flights, once TSA personnel arrive in-country to begin airport inspection and certification efforts. End summary.

Consular Efforts

2. (SBU) In order to best continue the level of service that has been available to Amcits since the closure of airports, the Consular Section has established a call center, operated by consular and volunteer Embassy staff twenty-four hours a day, to assist Americans, including providing them with airline and hotel contact information. We handled 60-80 calls total on December 2, down from roughly 200 a day over the weekend. The Consular Section is also coordinating with the Consular Affairs Bureau, in Washington, and with other Mission elements, to arrange charter flights for Americans later in the week (we've made no announcements until details are in place). We are advising Amcits not to head to U-Tapao or other airports outside of Bangkok unless they have a confirmed reservation in hand.

3. (SBU) Consular has also reached out to other Embassies in Thailand. The British, Canadian, and Australian Embassies are all considering chartering flights for their citizens according to their diplomats. The New Zealand Embassy has been assisting its citizens to fly out of U-Tapao air base

150 miles southeast of Bangkok.

Airlines

¶4. (SBU) The Embassy met with executives from United Airlines and Northwest Airlines on December 1. United reported it has canceled all flights to Bangkok through December 4 with no plans to resume them in the near future. United estimates 2,000 of their passengers are stranded in Thailand. Northwest estimates they have about 1,500 passengers stuck in Thailand bound for the United States and an additional 300 who intend to travel to Japan. T

¶5. (SBU) Thai Airways is offering the most international service in the greater Bangkok area (from the military airbase at U-Tapao, approximately 90 miles from Bangkok). The airline posted on its website a schedule for December 2 listing several flights to their most popular destinations. Thai Airways also announced plans to arrange a flight from U-Tapao to Los Angeles via Japan. However, United and Northwest executives confirm anecdotal reports that these flights are difficult to book and are on a first-come first-served basis. According to the Thai Airways website and local travel agents, passengers must check in seven hours in advance at a convention center in downtown Bangkok before boarding buses for U-Tapao airport. Other international airlines are increasing U-Tapao operations as well.

Airports

¶6. (SBU) Suvarnabhumi: Protesters have occupied the airport since November 25 (see reftel A) with no apparent

BANGKOK 00003531 002.2 OF 003

plan to leave. No flights are leaving or arriving at the airport. However, industry executives confirmed to the Embassy on December 1 that about 80 empty aircraft that had been parked at the airport, primarily belonging to Thai Airways, were allowed to be flown out without passengers. About 90 more empty aircraft remain at the airport. According to industry insiders, protesters have also surrounded the control towers and, if they chose to, could easily overrun them.

¶7. (SBU) Don Muang: The military side of Don Muang airport is available for chartered flights, which because of its convenience to the city would probably be preferable to arranging long bus rides to distant airports. The Embassy spoke with the Royal Thai Air Force (RTAF) on December 2 and determined that Wing Six, primarily reserved for military flights, is available for charter aircraft. The Embassy is working with Thai immigration and aviation officials to establish procedures for potential flights. The RTAF said France is already chartering flights from Wing Six using 747 aircraft. The protesters are located on the civilian side of the airport, and, at this point, have demonstrated no intention to cross over to the military side. The RTAF told us the area is secure. An airport official confirmed that someone threw a bomb near the access road to the civilian side of the airport around midnight December 2. The official estimated that one person was killed and over 20 wounded.

¶8. (SBU) U-Tapao: International flights departing from the Bangkok area are now taking off from U-Tapao. Primarily a military airport, U-Tapao has shouldered most of the burden since the airport seizures by protesters. Executives at major U.S. airlines reported that usage of U-Tapao presents many problems, the greatest being that it is not certified by the U.S. Transportation Security Administration (TSA). Therefore, direct flights from U-Tapao are not yet being allowed to land in the United States. In addition, given flight demand, U-Tapao lacks sufficient equipment such as stairs, check-in counters, and luggage trucks, and cannot accommodate enough Thai customs and immigration officials.

Nevertheless, airline executives indicate that ground equipment is being transferred to U-Tapao and flight capacity at the airport may be increased from about 20 per day to 40-50 flights a day. Currently, Thai Airways operates the vast majority of flights from U-Tapao. Neither United nor Northwest are operating flights from U-Tapao, but executives at the airlines have told us they might be prepared to begin flights if TSA can certify the airport. (Note: TSA inspectors are en route to Thailand).

¶9. (SBU) Chiang Mai: The international airport in Chiang Mai could ramp up for additional international flights, but the distance, 350 miles from Bangkok, could be a complicating factor for Amcits stranded in Bangkok, but a strong possibility for Amcits stranded in northern Thailand. Chiang Mai can be reached by bus or train.

¶10. (SBU) Other airports: Phuket has an international airport, but is only reachable from Bangkok by a 10-12 hour bus ride. Airports in Korat, Hua Hin, and Phitsanulok are not equipped for international flights at this point. Bangkok Airways has begun operating flights from Hua Hin to Kuala Lumpur and Singapore, via the Thai resort island Samui, but the landing strip in Samui is only long enough for a Boeing 737.

Security

¶11. (SBU) TSA anticipates two TSA representatives will arrive in Bangkok by train or bus via Phuket by December 3. An additional nine or ten transportation security inspectors will arrive later this week. The inspectors will begin the inspection process for U-Tapao and Wing Six at Don Muang, and at other airports as other options develop. Certification

BANGKOK 00003531 003.2 OF 003

will require inspection of all security aspects at the new airport locations. Note: Suvarnabhumi will need to be recertified once the protesters leave. Depending of the condition of the airport, estimates range from 2 to 10 days for how long re-certification could take.

¶12. (SBU) Security at Suvarnabhumi and Don Muang (civilian side), where protesters have encamped, has all but been abandoned. Countermeasures such as identification access control procedures and personnel screening are no longer present. The security apparatus at the U-Tapao airport is ill-equipped to handle the current volume of overflow passengers and reports suggest that security protocols at this airport could easily be circumvented. A series of specific security measures and procedures need to be exercised and conducted if security is to be brought up to even minimal standards. The RSO office will work closely with TSA, airlines, and other Mission sections to ensure the safety of passengers that may travel on U.S. airlines or charter flights.

¶13. (SBU) The security situation in Bangkok remains calm and stable. Embassy warden messages and staff announcements urge Amcits to avoid areas where protesters (both pro and anti-government) have congregated. While there have been reports of random explosions and shootings in and around the protest sites, there have been no instances of violence in other areas of the city.

¶14. (SBU) A septel addresses December 2 political developments.
JOHN